



Warren Neidich

# The Search Drive *A Hack-ography*

“I picture a future for writing that  
dispenses with mystery wherever it can,  
that embraces the astounding strides in  
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D.G. Walter

# Three Neuroaesthetics

At a time when different mediator-fields in cultural discourse (including curatorial practice, 'arts plastiques' theory, but also the more heterodox corners of cognitive science such as cognitive archaeology) are attentive to the intersections of the eye and the hand, the hand and the brain, the virtual and the neuronal (without necessarily glorifying these intersections as some new immaterial utopia or decrying them as a final stage in human alienation) it may be helpful to achieve some clarity with regards to neuroaesthetic programs. I suggest a distinction between three neuroaesthetics, which I'll term for the sake of convenience, the positivist, the idealist, and the militant.

Positivist neuroaesthetics seeks to locate cerebral areas and correlate them with cognitive and extend cultural functions such as those observed on the walls of major art museums. In a species of category mistakenly reminiscent of evolutionary psychology with its appeals to paleolithic affective life, this form of neuroaesthetics seeks to tell us, factually, that Cubism is "the way we actually see."<sup>3</sup> Here, notions such as artistic practice, representation, truth and the activity of the brain itself are quite thin. The problem is only magnified when the focus of positivist neuroaesthetics turns away from 'science' to facilitating the production of, e.g., literature. We then find pronouncements such as these: "I picture a future for writing that dispenses with mystery wherever it can, that embraces the astounding strides in thought-organ research. Ideally, a future where neuroimaging both miniaturises and becomes widespread, augmenting the craft of authors, critics, agents and publishing houses."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, a more idealist neuroaesthetics does not seek to "explain" one field, e.g. painting, by another field such as neuroanatomy aided by neuroimaging. Rather, in a stronger recognition of plasticity, without claiming to be a 'science' explaining cultural production – not least given a kind of historical overdetermination and sedimentation of perception – it emphasizes, like Deleuze, that "Creating new circuits in art means creating them in the brain."<sup>5</sup> A more naturalist version of this position would appeal to the notion of 'scaffolding,' according to which we are inseparable, as Andy Clark put it, from the "looping interactions" between our brains, our bodies, and "complex cultural and technological environments."<sup>6</sup>

Militant neuroaesthetics share with the idealist form a commitment to a kind of ontological monism in which the aesthetic and the neuronal occur on one shared plane, without either hierarchy or one being more fundamental than the other. But it adds the impetus to precisely "create new circuits." Whether it is in the form of an artistic intervention, a curatorial practice, or a theoretical statement, the militant neuroesthète makes use of "the histories, critiques, practices, apparatuses, spaces, and non-spaces and temporalities of artistic practice"<sup>7</sup> as these manifest themselves in painting, sculpture, performance, film, video, and installation art, "to counter these arguments and instead incite a different truth production program or alternative paradigm at odds with institutional practices." Here we find projects as diverse as Neidich's visual and/or cognitive ergonomics, and the still-unexplored Vygotskian project to connect political reform to knowledge of the cortex.<sup>8</sup> Again, like the

more idealist form of neuroaesthetics, these do hold that “the power of art is to create additionally evolving forms of variability in the environment that couple with the equally diverse forms of the brain’s own variability” (Neidich, Glossary of Cognitive Activism). Yet they add a meliorist project of the production of alternate zones of affect and perception, with implications for a distancing from mainstream social production (like the notion of the “distribution of the sensible”).

The promise and the paradox of a militant neuroaesthetics is quite similar to that of another intriguing yet at times nebulous concept, cognitive capitalism, because both share a duality of the normative and the natural, the virtual and the actual, the avant-garde and the status quo. That is, cognitive capitalism is both (a) a description of an actual, ‘second nature’ status quo in which our brains are a key component of our labor (the system of exploitation correspondingly targets this fact) and (b) a project to overcome this state of affairs with a normative, virtual impetus to create increasing difference and disturbance in the network. Militant neuroaesthetics (including “cognitive activism”) seeks to take advantage of the fact of our plasticity and interrelation with social and cultural forms to create “new forms of variability.” This is a far cry from neuro-advice for writers and publishers, or scientists claiming to discover laws of aesthetic experience.

<sup>3</sup>Semir Zeki, *Inner vision: An exploration of art and the brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For a helpful warning on these issues (which interestingly comes from the naturalistic side rather than from a defense-of-art-and-its-mystery sentiment), see Lambrous Malafouris, “*Mindful art*,” Comment on Nicolas J. Bullot, Rolf Reber, “*The artful mind meets art history: Toward a psycho-historical framework for the science of art appreciation*,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36 (2013): 123–180, comment at 151–152.

<sup>4</sup>D.G. Walter, “*What neuroscience tells us about the art of fiction*” (2012), <http://damiengwalter.com/2012/06/10/what-neuroscience-tells-us-about-the-art-of-fiction/>

<sup>5</sup>Gilles Deleuze, “*On The Time-Image*,” in *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 60. Note, however, that Deleuze – in a manner recalling his late statements on the virtual and attacks on advertising – declares immediately prior to this statement that aesthetics cannot be separated from the “complementary questions of cretinization and cerebralization” (ibid., emphasis mine).

<sup>6</sup>Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*. Minds, technologies and the future of human intelligence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11, 43. See also Malafouris’ “material engagement theory.”

<sup>7</sup>Warren Neidich, “*The Architectonics of the Mind’s Eye in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism*,” in Charles Wolfe, ed., *Brain Theory* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 265.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Wolfe, “*From Spinoza to the socialist cortex: Steps toward the social brain*,” in Deborah Hauptmann and Warren Neidich, eds., *Cognitive Architecture*. From Bio-Politics To Noo-Politics (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, Delft School of Design Series, 2010), 184–206.

Duende Neon Mana Proformance, 2014, Photos courtesy of Barbara Seiler Galerie →





**COGNITIVE ACTIVISM** Understands, first and foremost, that the doctrines, apparatuses, and means for achieving political resistance, including street demonstrations and sit-ins, were invented in the late 19th century and early 20th century. They were based on responses to labor practices and conditions associated with industrial capitalism or Fordism such as repetition, boredom, low pay, and poor working conditions. Post-industrial capitalism creates a very different series of stresses within labor. This now takes place on computer terminals and includes: precarity, real subsumption, software substitution for lower-end and less-skilled jobs, work replacement technology, fragmented worker scripts, exacerbated income inequality, and code-generated surplus value. Recently, there has emerged a materialist component to cognitive capitalism in which what is at stake is the premeditated institutional sculpting of the brain's neural plasticity. Cognitive activism is a call for the creation of new set of strategies, in addition to those already in use by the proletariat, with which to combat the dispositifs of control and normalization faced by the cognitariat in our accelerated age of the anthropocene.